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Decreasing Homework Excuses and Increasing Homework Hand-ins

by

Stacy Leigh Belden
August 2007

A thesis submitted to the

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Decreasing Homework Excuses and Increasing Homework Hand-ins

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Chapter I

Introduction

Background

The number of days in which teachers have to prepare students in content areas for mandated tests has dwindled significantly. Often times state and/or district tests are administered mid-year. Trying to effectively and efficiently teach academic content along with test practice has become increasingly challenging for teachers. In response to such demands, it is commonplace for teachers to assign daily homework. A recent study by Corno and Xu (2004) indicates that teachers assign homework for a variety of reasons. According to Corno and Xu, some teachers use homework as a way to review and reinforce material covered in class. They also state homework may be used to extend and enhance learning beyond the classroom lessons, or to prepare students for new material. According to Simplicio (2005) consistent studies show that homework, when used properly, is an effective way to support educational learning goals. In addition, Simplicio states that students who consistently complete their homework learn more and have a greater possibility for academic success. Studies by educators including research, surveys, interviews, and literature reviews conclude that there is a

positive correlation between homework and higher levels of student academic achievement. In addition to the link between homework and improved student achievement, Feldman (2004) points out that homework has also been shown to help teach students to work independently, encourage responsibility and develop good study habits.

Unfortunately, despite the benefits of homework, many students choose to spend little time or exert little effort when it comes to homework. Others choose not to do homework at all. Buell (2000) states that students, ages nine to eleven, have experienced an almost 40 percent increase in homework assignments in the last decade and a half. However, despite the increase in the amount of homework being assigned to students, the time students allocate to completing homework has not changed significantly over the past two decades. According to Simplicio (2005), most students spend only an average of one hour per day on homework assignments. Further research on the topic indicates that students view homework as a source of stress and struggle (Laciana-Gifford and Gifford, 2004). Numerous studies report a variety of reasons that students do little or no homework. Hinchey (1996) divides students' reasons for not doing homework into two categories: not enough time and failure to see the purpose. Interestingly, Hinchey goes

on to state in his research, that student “excuses” for not attending to homework are often valid, and many times teachers acknowledge this fact. Hinchey suggests that the frustration felt by so many teachers can be eased if teachers begin to think carefully about why students often refuse to do homework assignments. He goes on to say that perhaps teachers should start thinking critically about what is assigned as homework, under what conditions, and why.

Statement of the Problem

As a teacher, I believe that homework can be an effective strategy for developing learning skills and reinforcing knowledge gained within the classroom. However, day after day students enter my classroom without their homework completed. As a result, academic disparities and gaps grow among students. The purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which to motivate students to complete homework. As stated by Richard Stiggins (2005), “We can succeed as teachers only if we help our students want to learn.”

Significance of the Problem

While teachers find homework important, what is really important is that students find the value in homework and take the time to complete it.

Today's educators, in pursuit of high academic standards, need to understand how to motivate students to complete homework assignments.

Increasing numbers of students are now facing batteries of new standardized tests. More than ever, pressure is being felt by teachers, administrators, school boards, parents and students to perform well on these tests. Studies show that homework, from the elementary through the university level, is an effective method to reinforce educational learning goals.

Unfortunately, many students fail to see the importance or significance of homework. More and more students are coming to class unprepared and arrive without their homework completed. Researchers agree that the practice of assigning homework without deliberate, thought out strategies, practices and policies associated with the homework, will likely result in students' lack of motivation and/or concern for the assignment. Fortunately, researchers have discovered and studied numerous ways in which teachers can positively motivate students to complete homework assignments.

Rationale

I believe that by developing more deliberate and structured homework policies and practices, I will see an increase in the number of students who

complete quality homework assignments. As a result of such policies and practices, students will be more inclined to want to finish homework assignments in a quality manner, thus resulting in increased academic success.

I will implement the use of two recommended strategies in an effort to improve the number of homework assignments completed by students. First, I will outline and communicate my homework policy to parents. Parents will be required to read, sign and return the policy to school. Secondly, I will provide students with time in class to begin any homework assignments. In doing so, students will have an opportunity to ask questions. In addition, I will be able to monitor students' understanding of instructions and concepts before sending them off to work independently. By communicating expectations to parents, along with advice about how to support their child's learning at home, and beginning the homework process in a supervised, structured manner, I hope to create a more effective and motivating system for the completion of homework assignments.

I believe that the benefits and effectiveness of homework depends upon the policies and practices that encase the task. Students need not only to be motivated to complete the task, they need to understand it, as well as

have the necessary resources to complete it successfully. As teachers, it is our job to create and provide a homework system, which includes policies and practices that not only allow students these opportunities, but also enhance them.

As a result of this action research project, I anticipate an increase in the number of students who come to class prepared with their homework. The following chapter analyzes the current research on homework related issues. In the literature review I will discuss the effectiveness of homework, analyze reasons for homework incompleteness, and show the necessity for structured homework policies and practices.

Methodology

In effort to increase the number of students who complete homework assignments in my classroom, I plan on implementing a structured homework system. Students will be made aware of and understand homework expectations. Parents will be provided with an outline of these expectations, along with suggestions to aid the homework process. They will be asked to read, sign and return notification to me that they have seen this outline. In addition, I will provide fifteen minutes at the end of each class for students to begin their assigned homework. Providing students and parents

with clearly stated homework expectations, along with time in class to begin the homework process, students will be motivated to complete homework assignments on a more regular basis.

For three weeks prior to the implementation of the motivational homework strategies, I will chart the number of students who come to class prepared with their homework complete. On the first day of the fourth week, I will share and discuss the homework expectations outline with students. In addition, students will be asked to bring the outline home to their parent/guardian for review, and required to return the verification portion of the document signed by their parent/guardian. I will continue to chart the number of students who come to class prepared with their homework assignments for the three weeks following the implementation of the motivational homework strategies.

E. Definition of Terms

1. Homework: Tasks assigned to students intended to be completed during non-school hours.
2. Motivational Strategy: A plan of action that provides reason and purpose for accomplishing a specific goal.
3. Standardized Test: A test that is administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner.
4. Educational Learning Goal: Effort on behalf of a school system or educator to instruct or inform students of a skill or concept.
5. Academic Standards: Description of what students are expected to know and be able to do.
6. Academic Success: Educational achievement.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The historical debate over homework

One conclusion can be drawn for certain about homework: it has always aroused strong passions pro and con. According to Cooper and Valentine (2001), debates about homework date as far back as the 19th century. At that time, high school students were the only ones assigned homework. Students were expected to study 2-3 hours per night, weekends included. Parents in Boston and San Francisco protested homework during this time period, as the welfare of their families often required labor by all family members. School boards sided with parents and sought to abolish homework or make it optional so that students may attend to family obligations, as well as attend school. However, these regulations did not last long, as educators reasoned that students who wished to attend high school must be willing to study and those unwilling to study were free to drop out (Gill and Schlossman, 2004).

Research conducted during the 20th century by Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice, a physician who was interested in children's health and learning, found that requiring students to use the drill, memorization and recitation style of study

to learn was not only detrimental to their health, but ineffective as well (as found in Gill and Schlossman, 2004). Up until the mid-nineteen hundreds, critics of homework and proponents of the progressive education movement continued to blame various harms to health, character, and family on homework. In addition, they argued homework did not improve children's learning (Gill and Schlossman, 2004).

Researchers Gill and Schlossman (2004) assert that an academic excellence movement in the mid 1950's replaced the progressive education movement. Favorable views of homework began to appear regularly in scholarly and popular educational periodicals, as the United States scurried to catch up to the Soviet Union that had just launched Sputnik. Americans believed that the United States was losing the Cold War because Russian children were smarter, working harder and achieving more in school. More positive attitudes and higher academic standards were introduced in the 1950's, and school boards began to overturn previously set policies that limited the amount of homework teachers could assign (Ohanian, 2004).

Interestingly, the 1960's brought about further research on the topic. Avram Goldstein, a professor in Stanford University's medical school, introduced research that revealed distortions in the methodology of previous

studies that had claimed homework did not contribute to academic achievement as found in Cooper and Valentine, 2001. Goldstein's reanalysis of the data showed that homework positively influenced student achievement in the elementary and high school grades. As stated by Goldstein, "Homework should clearly be required in all schools" (Goldstein, 1960, as found in Gill and Schlossman, 2004, p. 5).

Researchers Gill and Schlossman (2004) go on to state that although the issue of homework became secondary to the political and cultural authority that surrounded the Vietnam War during the late 1960's and early 1970's, it again sparked national discussion when William Bennett's U.S. Department of Education published *What Works*, which endorsed homework unequivocally and provided specific recommendations for educators (U.S. Department of Education, 1986, as found in in Cooper and Valentine, 2001).

Recently, Coutts (2004) spent time researching the current viewpoints of educators, parents, and students about homework. Her research shows that there is a convergence of viewpoints among parents, educators, and middle and high school students, in that all view homework as a vehicle for academic success. Gill and Schlossman (2004) add that despite the ongoing

controversy over homework, most parents have consistently supported, and continue to support homework today.

The Effectiveness of homework

Undoubtedly, students, parents or teachers feel frustration due to some aspect of daily homework. So why do we continue to assign it? Educators, parents and policymakers endorse the practice of assigning homework as they note the value of its positive academic and character building outcomes (Gill and Schlossman, 2004). In addition, they support the practice of homework in an effort to promote America's international competitiveness. Simplicio (2005) contributes that homework is a time-honored strategy for developing learning skills and reinforcing knowledge gained within the classroom. Bempechat (2004) asserts that homework plays a critical, long-term role in the development of students' achievement. He believes that homework provides students with an opportunity to develop positive beliefs about achievement; as well as strategies for coping with mistakes, difficulties and setbacks. According to Buell, (2000) under-funded school districts are piling up the homework in response to higher academic expectations and mandated standardized testing.

Vail (2007) acknowledges that the review of homework's benefits and drawbacks, commissioned by the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education, shows that the research is mixed on the effects of homework on student achievement. Some studies say that it does help raise grades and test scores. While other studies say there is no connection between homework and increased student achievement. Still, there is other research that suggests that homework can have a negative effect on achievement. Typically, according to the Center for Public Education's (CPE) report, older students benefit more than younger students from homework with studies showing that one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours is optimum for high school students; for middle school students, the amount is an hour or less. Any more time than that, studies suggest lessens any academic benefits from homework.

According to Kohn (2006) homework overwhelms struggling students and takes the joy out of learning for high achievers. In addition he adds there are psychological costs as well for students who do not understand the homework and find it hard to sit still and do more work beyond the school day.

Research by Van Voorhis (2004), goes on to identify a variety of reasons why teachers choose to assign homework. He classifies teachers' reasoning into three categories: instructional, communicative and political. The purpose of assigning homework for instructional purposes includes providing practice, preparation for the next class, participation in learning and opportunity for personal development. Assigning homework for communicative purposes is intended to encourage parent-teacher communication, parent-child relations, and/or peer interactions. Homework that serves a political function is for the purpose of fulfilling a policy mandate or to satisfy public expectations. Researchers Corno and Xu (2004) agree by stating that some teachers use homework as a way to review and reinforce material covered in class, to extend and enhance learning beyond the classroom lessons, or to prepare students for new material.

Coutts (2004) classifies reasons teachers assign homework into four categories. First is academic function. These include things such as completing unfinished work, practice and drill, preparation for and expansion of concepts introduced in the classroom. The next category is socialization purposes. Encouraging responsibility, study skills, and time management are part of the socialization purposes for assigning homework.

Coutts refers to home/school/community communication as the third category as to why teachers assign homework. A school and system requirement is the last category in which Coutts attributes reasons why teachers assign homework. For this reason, homework is assigned as a way to ease time constraints in a crowded curriculum (Coutts, 2004).

As students progress from elementary to middle school, they begin to view homework as part of their “jobs” as students state Corno and Xu (2004). According to the researchers, this can enhance the positive outcomes intended by homework. Students who learn to manage their homework will deepen content knowledge, in addition to develop good work habits and self-control, as well as develop the ability to effectively assume more personal responsibility.

Much research supports the fact that teachers find homework necessary and beneficial. But the question as to what makes the homework effective remains. More homework can sound like a good idea, but that depends on how it is done contends *The USA Today*. (N.A., 2003).

Research by Hong, Milgram and Rowell (2004) shows that students, teachers, counselors and parents all play an important role in determining the degree to which homework is effective. They state that everyone involved

must cooperate, share information about homework motivation and preferences, and develop strategies that can be used to attain a better match between what the student likes to do and has to do when learning. Vail (2007) believes a plausible idea for assuring effective homework practices would be to have individual schools set homework guidelines based on recommendations from teachers, administrators, and parents.

Cooper and Valetine (2001) address the issue of homework by stating that homework has a place and purpose. They contend that homework can have beneficial effects on student achievement and help students recognize that learning can occur at home as well as at school. In addition they add that homework can foster independent learning, responsible character traits, as well as provide parents with an opportunity to see what is going on in school.

However, they go on to add that in order for homework to be effective, teachers, administrators, parents and students need to evaluate their homework expectations and goals. Kohn (2006) advises that teachers keep homework positive. His ideas include consulting the students, or allowing them to participate in the decision-making, assigning homework only when necessary, individualizing a variety of assignments that match different

interests and capabilities, designing your own homework assignments, and utilizing completed homework as an opportunity to share, explain and explore. In addition, he adds that taking a break from homework on occasion may be beneficial to the morale and climate of the classroom.

Stager (2006) supports Kohn's ideas by pointing out that assigning the same homework to every student is not likely to have the academic benefits intended by the teacher. Vail (2007, p. 31) notes, "Too much homework can backfire for all groups of students."

Reasons for homework incompleteness

Failing to complete homework is widespread and caused by various reasons (Lacina-Gifford and Gifford, 2004). One major factor that contributes to the lack of homework completion is the fact that homework has become a major battle among families. Lately, the amount of homework being assigned to students is creating stress and problems for entire families, leaving students unable and/or unwilling to attend to homework at all. Stager (2006) contends that homework often injects unnecessary stress, conflict, and interruption into family life by sacrificing the joys of childhood to one-size fits all homework policies.

Van Voorhis (2004) points out that many parents lack the will, time and/or knowledge to help their child with homework. Lacina-Gifford and Gifford (2004) reiterate this idea by stating that few adults who work all day want to come home to hours of homework. They believe that both children and adults need downtime. In early 2003, both National Public Radio and CBS Sunday Morning aired extensive reports on the homework issue. Both programs featured interviews with exasperated students and parents alike who said they just are not able to handle so much homework. Time magazine devoted much of one issue to the nightly battle of homework. Its banner headline read, "*The Homework Ate My Family*". Susan Ohanian (2004) argues, "When whole families feel stressed over a child's homework and insist they have no time to relax or exercise or have fun together, then there is too much homework" (p. 29).

Research by Coutts (2004) claims that the widely reported tension and conflict in families about homework completion may be due to the conflicting meanings students and parents ascribe to homework and the purposes it fulfills. Parents cite the positive outcomes of homework such as motivational, academic, and life skills benefits, while students fail to recognize these rewards. One difficulty for students is that these future benefits may have

limited immediate relevance to them. Students' reasoning for completing homework tends to be more extrinsically motivated than intrinsically.

Stager (2006) warns that homework often injects stress, conflict and interruption into family life. He contends that some students have no time, place or means in which to do homework. He argues that family responsibilities sometimes outweigh or take priority over homework.

Lacina-Gifford and Gifford (2004) identify with this by reporting that homework is not only causing family problems, it is widening the achievement gap. They point out that not all students are privy to the same educational resources at home. Some students live with well-educated parents and have access to computers, while other students have family responsibilities, parents who work at night, and no access to educational resources at home. (Kralovec and Buell, 2001, as found in Lacina-Gifford and Gifford, 2004). Failure to complete homework may be due to difficult home circumstances and/or not seeing the point or reason for the homework (Darling-Hammond, and Ifill-Lynch, 2006).

Xu (2005) warns that while parents' and teachers' views toward homework have been researched, students' views remain noticeably absent from contemporary homework literature. For example, Xu points out that

research completed by Epstein and Van Voorhis (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001, as found in Xu, 2005) outlines 10 purposes for doing homework that are based largely upon information received from surveys and interviews with adults. Purposes such as: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-child relations, parent-teacher communications, peer interactions, and others may be of little priority or relevance to the students involved.

Students who claim they do not have enough time for homework explain the need for a social life (Scarpa, 2003). Students acknowledge that they sometimes skip homework because they want to spend time with their boyfriend/girlfriend or hang out with their friends. Students confess that they sometimes forgo homework and opt otherwise to simply get out of the house, have guests over, attend parties, listen to music or talk with friends. Kohn (2006) claims that homework means kids have less time for other activities and less opportunity for the kind of learning that does not involve traditional skills. He notes that there is less chance to read for pleasure, make friends, play games, exercise, rest, or just be a child.

Another reason some students admit finding time for homework is difficult is due to their involvement in after-school activities. As Simplicio .

(2005) points out, homework means students have less time for extracurricular and community activities such as sports, Boy Scouts, religious obligations, etc. In addition, a lot of students are expected to help out with household chores such as cooking, cleaning and/or laundry. Caring for younger siblings also makes scheduling homework as a top priority difficult. This idea is supported by the fact that low-income urban schools report large numbers of students unable to complete even minor homework assignments because of competing demands for their time from family and work (Morse, 1999 as found in Cosden, Morrison, Albanese and Macias, 2001).

Despite adult insistence that homework is important, students often form their own attitudes about homework (Coutts, 2004). Students who claim there is no point in homework feel that they get nothing out of it and teachers place no value on it. Students assume that teachers do not really care about homework because they do not collect, read, grade or use the homework in class. Since teachers do not collect, check or grade the homework, students feel they might as well not complete it (Winger, 2005).

As suggested by Kohn (2006), "With homework, as with most things, one size simply doesn't fit all" (p. 4). The level of difficulty in many assignments is often inappropriate for all students; it may be too easy for

some and too difficult for others. Assignments that are deemed too easy by students are often dismissed as useless and boring. If there is nothing to learn in the assignment, then students see little point in completing it. On the other hand, if a student can excel in a class without completing homework, or if the homework does nothing to expand a student's thinking, then the student believes there is no real good in doing it, and not doing it offers little harm (Kohn, 2006).

Research also points out that many students fail to view homework in a positive manner. More than 60 percent of fifth grade students in Chen and Stevenson's research felt negatively about homework (Chen and Stevenson, 1989, as found in Coutts, 2004). Coutts (2004) emphasizes that when so many students describe homework as boring and lacking intrinsic interest, it is not surprising that the activity is not liked. Leone and Richards (1989, as found in Coutts, 2004) argue that one of the contributing factors to the negative attitude towards homework is the typically solitary nature of the homework task. They identify higher levels of interest and positive affect when homework is completed with friends.

Homework policies and practices

Finding out how students view homework is important to their success in school. Cooper (1998, as found in Xu, 2005, p. 46) states, "As students grow older their own attitudes about homework play an increasingly important role in how much homework they complete and in their class grades." Cosden, et. al (2001) claim that the past 10 years has seen a sharp increase in homework demands. They propose that this increase has come in part, due to the perception that there is greater competition for college admissions, and that students need to work harder to qualify for the college of their choice.

Kohn (2006) encourages teachers to communicate with students about their homework experiences. He advocates that teachers distribute anonymous questionnaires to students that seek answers to the following questions: Do students find that homework really is useful? Why or why not? Are certain kinds of homework better than others? How does homework affect their interest in learning? What are its other effects on their lives, and on their family?

Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) looked to the teachers and principals of small high schools in New York City and Boston that boast a 90

percent graduation rate for advice. These successful urban educators propose that schools create a strong academic culture that changes student beliefs and behaviors, convincing them to engage in their schoolwork in order to be effective. Feldman (2004) emphasizes that with the right focus, the work students do at home can reinforce the lessons they learn in school. He recommends setting and following simple guidelines for maximizing the benefits students receive from homework policies and practices.

Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) support ideas such as assigning work that is worthy of effort. In other words, examine the homework that is assigned and ask the following questions: What is the purpose of the particular task? Do students have adequate support to complete it? Does it make sense? Is it necessary? Is it useful given the circumstances under which it is to be carried out at home?

In addition, schools are requesting and perhaps even requiring the help and support of parents when it comes to homework (Jacobson, 2003). Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) contend that students whose parents understand the homework and can help them with it have a major advantage over students whose parents are unable or unavailable to help. Public schools in Philadelphia believe that “home support” is so important

they have begun to assess how well parents are providing the support that their children need to do well in school on student report cards (Jacobson, 2003).

Gutierrez (2001) warns however, that over involvement by the parent can be harmful. Students develop the No Sense in Both of Us Worrying Syndrome when parents complete their homework for them. Gutierrez recommends parents help get their child organized by reviewing school assignment books or planners to schedule study time, extra curricular activities, and/or other obligations. Furthermore, Gutierrez stresses that parents should note what their child is doing well and praise them for it. Do not focus on the negative. Gutierrez (2001, p. 2) warns, "Every time we focus on the negative over the positive, we tear that child down a little bit more."

Feldman (2004) suggests teachers assign homework regularly and consistently in order to get students in the habit of doing homework and establishing a pattern from which students may follow. In addition, he believes that teachers should communicate with parents by sending the policy home for parents to read, sign and return. He goes on to offer other ideas such as: making homework count as a grade, making assignments varied and interesting, accommodating varied ability levels, providing

personal and targeted feedback, and making available support and advice for parents on how to help their child's learning at home.

Gutierrez (2001) advises parents to set aside a consistent learning time for homework. This means deciding if the child will work on homework right after school or wait until after dinner. He also adds that "learning time" should be a family activity in which the parent models enthusiasm for learning by reading a book or doing his/her own work-related tasks.

Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) reported that some schools have put into place systematic ways of ensuring that students have opportunities to get their homework done in school. They observed that some successful schools have added homework time at the beginning or end of the school day, or advisory periods, where students work under the supervision of their advisor.

They cite one school that has included in their schedule a period called "Drop-In" for every student. This is a class where a teacher voluntarily shares his/her prep period with a small number of students. The teacher is not required to teach, rather to simply provide an opportunity for the students to sit in the presence of a caring, supportive adult for an extended period of time to complete work. They contend that this enables the student

and teacher to establish a strong relationship that eventually leads to “authentic intellectual experiences” for students.

As stated by Hong et. al (2004) “Homework is a powerful tool that can contribute to the advancement of children’s education, or it can do more damage than good to their education and development” (p. 7). They claim the difference between the outcomes depends on the quality of decisions as to how homework is implemented. They maintain that accommodating students’ learning preferences increases the likelihood that their learning potential will be actualized.

Recent findings on the influence of homework on student outcomes are mixed reports Cosden et. al (2001). Fortunately however, questioning whether or not homework contributes to the success of students has led teachers and administrators to reflect on what had been the automatic process of assigning homework. This has resulted in more explicit reasoning in what and how homework is being assigned. Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) agree that struggling learners benefit when learning goals and the desired quality of learning products are explicit.

Homework intervention approaches should be designed to help educators and parents meet the challenge of successfully assisting children in

the development of attitudes and skills that contribute to effective learning and academic achievement summarizes Hong et. al (2004). Collaboration is the key to developing effective strategies to address the needs of a diverse student body notes Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006). Educators need opportunities to work together allowing time for collaboration and teacher inquiry, which play a pivotal role in successful responses to student disengagement.

Simplicio(2005) acknowledges that parents and educators in both the public and private sectors are calling for a "radical rethinking" of the use of homework. In response, prominent researchers have turned their attention to the subject of homework. Researchers agree that the daily educational practice of assigning homework is in need of improvement.

Simplicio (2005) proposes that when attempting to solve the homework dilemma, it is important to understand that there are several important realities to take into account. First of all, teachers will continue to assign homework no matter what the outcry. Secondly, homework, when done well, affords students the opportunity to improve their academic skills. Finally, hectic schedules will continue to be a major part of the daily burdens

that students face every day. The answer will be to find a balance that accommodates both students and teachers.

By setting aside time at the end of class for students to begin homework and communicating expectations and procedures to students and parents, schools will be better able to guarantee that educational goals are met, while at the same time relieving some time pressures students and their families face outside of school. The result will be better educated and less stressed students (Simplicio, 2005).

Chapter III

Applications and Evaluations

Introduction

The members of the target group of this action research project were sixth grade students in an urban school district about thirty minutes from Rochester, New York. The main purpose of this action research study was to examine effective strategies for increasing the number of completed homework assignments handed-in on time. The study was designed to determine if communicating homework policies and procedures with parents and providing students with time at the end of class to begin their homework had an effect on the number of homework assignments completed on time. Another goal of this study was to assess students' opinions toward homework. The study helped to analyze the impact of the use of explicit homework policies and procedures on students' attitudes toward homework.

Participants

This study included nineteen sixth grade students from a middle school that houses approximately 900 total students in grades six through eight. The poverty rate in the school, demonstrated by the number of free and reduced lunches, was approximately 33 percent. The sixth graders used

in this study closely reflected this percentage. The class, composed of nine girls and ten boys, was not an inclusion class, and none of the students had individualized education plans; however, two of the students had 504 plans and all of the students received academic intervention services in English language arts.

Procedures

The 19 members of the class were assigned and expected to complete English language arts homework on a regular basis. For the purposes of this study, homework was given four nights per week, giving the students one night each week free of homework. For a period of three weeks, I recorded the number of homework assignments students handed in, complete and on time.

In an effort to increase this number, I drafted a letter to parents that explained the importance of homework. The letter included suggestions about how to support the homework process at home and outlined my homework expectations for their child (see Appendix A). Students were expected to deliver the letter to their parents, have it signed and returned to me the next day. In addition, I asked the students to reflect on their

experiences with homework and conducted an anonymous survey of their thoughts and feelings about homework (see Appendix B).

Throughout the following three weeks, I allotted fifteen minutes at the end of each class for students to begin the nightly homework assignment. During this time, I monitored students' understanding of homework directions, as well as concepts and ideas necessary to complete the given assignment. Again, I recorded the number of homework assignments students completed on time during this period. For further analysis, I assessed students at the end of this three weeks on concepts and ideas that correlated with the in-class lessons and homework assignments (see Appendix C).

To wrap up my study, I again surveyed the students anonymously about their attitudes and opinions of homework. The same survey that was used to begin the study was used at completion. In essence, students' thoughts and feelings towards homework and the number of assignments completed on time were recorded and analyzed for three weeks prior to and after the implementation of the two described homework motivational strategies.

Instruments of study

Students were given a pre- and post- survey that included nine open-ended prompts and four true/false questions that attempted to reveal individual attitudes and opinions about homework. Student responses were analyzed qualitatively to determine common themes disclosed about homework.

The number of homework assignments completed on time was checked and recorded for each assignment throughout the study. The results of this data were entered into Microsoft Excel to determine whether or not an increase in the number of completed homework assignments had occurred as a result of the interventions.

Students were also given an assessment at the culmination of the study. This instrument assessed students' understanding of concepts and ideas that were taught and practiced in-class and through homework during the research period. I scored all of the assessments and created a table in Microsoft Word to analyze the results.

Results

Chapter IV

Student homework completion

The number of completed homework assignments handed in on time by students were tracked and recorded for three weeks prior to and after the interventions. The results of the tracking are reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Completed Homework Assignments

	Prior to Interventions	After Interventions
Week #1	83%	84%
Week #2	78%	82%
Week #3	80%	82%
Highest percentage of assignments completed in one day	89%	95%
Lowest percentage of assignments completed in one day	68%	73%

According to Table 1 above, the percentages of completed homework assignments handed in on time prior to the implementation of the structured homework policies and procedures ranged from 78% to 83%. The highest

percentage of completed homework assignments handed in at one time was 89%. The lowest percentage of completed homework assignments handed in at one time was 68%. The percentage of completed homework assignments handed in on time following the homework interventions ranged from 82% to 84%. The highest percentage of completed homework assignments handed in at one time was 95%. The lowest percentage of completed homework assignments handed in at one time was 73%.

Student attitude toward homework

Prior to the implementation of the structured interventions of homework policies and procedures, students were given a survey to assess their attitudes toward homework (see Appendix B). Nine of the survey questions were sentence prompts in which students were given the beginning of a sentence and asked to complete the sentence in their own words. These were open-ended questions that solicited the students' own thoughts and feelings about homework whether negative or positive. The survey also included four true/false questions. These questions were used to assess students' attitudes towards homework and the homework process. Two of these questions were written to expose students' feelings towards homework

in general and the other two questions were written to expose students' attitudes towards the homework process.

The open-ended survey questions indicated that the students, overall, felt negatively toward homework. The nine qualifying comments made by students resulted in some similar themes about homework. Eleven students or 58 percent stated that homework is "boring" or "a waste of time." Nine students or 47 percent made reference to the fact that homework "takes away from fun/playing" or "takes too long." Twelve students or 63 percent completed the sentence; "I often worry about" by making reference to their grades, not getting homework done or not understanding the homework. The results also showed that several students did not see the value of homework. Six students or 32 percent marked false the statement, "It is important to do homework." Another commonality among the student surveys was that ten students or 53 percent indicated that it was true that they "Sometimes fall behind on their assignments because they do not understand the homework." Overall, the surveys indicated that students have negative attitudes towards homework.

The same survey was given to students after the implementation of the structured homework policies and procedures. The open-ended survey

questions again resulted in some similar themes about how students perceived homework. This time, six students or 32 percent stated that what they liked best about homework was, “being able to do it in class.” Eleven students or 58 percent marked true the question, “When I finish homework I feel very proud of myself.” Originally ten students, or 53 percent felt it was true that they “Sometimes fall behind on my assignments because I don’t understand the homework.” However, on the post-survey, half the number of students indicated that this was the case.

Student achievement

At the completion of the three-week time period in which the structured homework policies and procedures were implemented, students were assessed on their understanding of concepts and ideas taught during this time. The result of the assessment is reported in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Assessment Class Average	78.42%
Highest Grade	92%
Lowest Grade	56%

According to the table on the previous page, the nineteen students who took the assessment obtained an average of 78.42%. The highest score on the test was 92%, which was achieved by two students. The lowest score in the class was a 56%, which was obtained by a single student.

Chapter V

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this thesis was to determine if the creation and implementation of explicit homework policies and procedures would increase the number of completed homework assignments handed-in on time. Specifically, I wanted to find out if giving students time at the end of class to begin their homework and communicating homework policies and procedures to parents would result in an increased number of homework assignments completed and handed-in on time by students. I also wanted to assess student attitudes towards homework prior to and after the structured homework interventions. By analyzing the results of the student surveys and assessment, along with tracking the number of assignments handed-in before and after the interventions, I have drawn some conclusions about the effectiveness of the use of these two motivational homework strategies.

When observing the data, it was clear that more students handed-in their homework after the implementation of the two strategies than before. Students were determined to have completed and handed-in homework 80 percent of the time prior to the interventions. After implementing specific homework policies and procedures and communicating these procedures

with parents, along with providing students time at the end of class to begin their homework, students were determined to complete and hand-in homework 83 percent of the time. This three percent increase in the number of homework assignments completed and handed-in on time suggests that students were more apt to complete their homework with the two interventions in place. This suggests that the two interventions were effective in motivating students to complete homework more often. This finding aligns well with the current research on effective homework policies and procedures. The studies have shown that in classrooms where homework policies and procedures are implemented effectively, students are more apt to complete homework.

Analyzing the pre- and post- survey results can draw several interesting conclusions. If we look at the pre survey statements made by students, it was evident that students had a negative attitude toward homework. Several common themes about student attitudes towards homework emerged as a result of the survey. Many students made reference to the fact that they found homework “boring” or “a waste of time.” More than half the students also marked true the statement “Sometimes I fall behind on my assignments because I don’t understand the homework.”

By analyzing the post survey results it was clear that student attitudes towards homework improved. This time more positive statements were made. Six students or 32 percent responded to the prompt “what I like best about homework is” by stating “being able to do it in class.” In addition, the post survey results found that half the number of students cited in the pre survey indicated that they sometimes fall behind on homework because they do not understand it. This suggests that students’ attitudes towards homework were positively affected by the implementation of the two structured homework strategies. Students felt better about homework when given the opportunity to start the task in class and when parents were provided with expectations and suggestions about how to support the homework process at home.

The data gathered from the assessment given after the structured homework interventions were implemented showed that students performed fairly well. The assessment was passed by 79 percent of the students. Three students received grades of 90% or above.

Although I found my research to be effective in motivating students to complete and hand in homework assignments more consistently and frequently, I also discovered throughout the research process that there were

ways to improve the methods I chose to use in this project. For example, I believe that I would have gathered more sound and substantial data if I had given the final assessment to another group of students for comparison. In other words, being able to compare a control group to the research group would have provided me with information as to whether or not completing homework effects student achievement.

Another recommendation for improving my study would be to design a more measurable survey. For example, it would have been less difficult to interpret student data if I had used a specific number of negative and positive questions or prompts. This would have enabled me to be more accurate in calculating whether students' attitudes towards homework were positive or negative. In other words, I would recommend using a survey that was less subjective in its interpretation.

Reflecting on my days as a student, I try to recall what contributed to my good grades and success. I recall not liking homework and feeling many of the same ways about homework as most of my students reported. I would have much preferred socializing, watching T.V. or even doing nothing to completing homework.

However, doing your homework was not an option in my household.

Unlike many of the students that I teach today, I had parents who valued education and were able to provide me with the necessary resources and support to be a successful student. Regardless, I cannot help but wonder were all of those homework assignments necessary and beneficial to my academic achievement?

Thinking back I can recall homework assignments that really engaged me as a learner and impacted me in some positive way. However, I can also recall many assignments that were more about putting in your time than about actually learning or reinforcing a concept or idea. The assignments that engaged me as learner usually involved some type of hands-on project or activity. It usually required me to create something and gave me the freedom to use my own imagination and style. The directions and guidelines were clear and usually came from a teacher that I knew would grade or acknowledge my effort in a fair and serious manner. Much of the research on homework today reinforces this idea. Homework can be effective and useful when the task is understandable and meaningful to the learner.

I believe that today's student is not that different from when I was in school, and although it is not an easy one, it is my job as a teacher to figure

out what motivates and drives my students to learn in and outside the classroom. I believe more research needs to be done in the future on ways to motivate students to complete homework. Although many studies have been completed on this topic, most of them were done taking into consideration an adult perspective only. In other words, the research was done based on what teachers, administrators, school counselors and/or parents perceived to motivate students to complete homework. Few studies have been completed from the student point of view.

Through this research project, I have found that students are more likely to complete homework assignments when the homework policies and procedures are communicated with parents and students are given time in class to begin the assignment. These findings reinforce what most research says about ways to motivate students to complete homework.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Parent Letter

Dear Parent(s),

I believe that when parents show an interest in their child's schoolwork, they teach an important lesson-that learning is fun and worth the effort. Please review the homework expectations for your child, and sign and return the bottom portion. It is my hope that by working together to encourage and enforce these guidelines, that your child will be able to reach his/her academic potential. Homework can help students learn and can help parents be involved in their children's education. Please note I have provided a few suggestions on how to support the homework process on the back of this letter. Feel free to contact me at any time regarding any questions or concerns you may have. I can be reached at 637-1860 or by email at sbelden@bcs1.org. Thank you for your support!

Homework Policies and Procedures

- Students will be expected to complete homework or study on a regular basis outside of class.
- Students will be expected to record homework assignments in their personal agendas or assignment books daily.
- Homework assignments that are due on a certain day will be checked or handed-in at the beginning of class.
- Students absent from school have the number of days of school missed to make-up the work with out penalty.
- Failing to complete homework on time will result in the student having to stay after school to complete the assignment.

Parent signature

Student signature

Things You Can Do To Help Your Child With Homework

- ✓ Show you think education and homework are important. Children are more eager to do homework if they know their parents care it gets done.
- ✓ Set a regular time for homework. The best time is one that works for your child and your family.
- ✓ Pick a place to study that is fairly quiet and has lots of light. A desk, kitchen table or corner of the living room can work just fine.
- ✓ Help your child concentrate by turning off the TV and saying no to social phone calls during homework time.
- ✓ Check to see that assignments are started and finished on time. If you aren't home when the homework is finished, look it over when you get home.
- ✓ Try to "catch" your child doing something right and praise them for it.
- ✓ Allow your child to take a break after a long assignment or period of time before starting back up again.

Appendix B: Homework Survey

Homework Survey

Directions: Reflect on your own experiences with homework. Then, carefully read each statement. Use your own thoughts and feelings to respond.

Finish each unfinished sentence.

Homework is _____

The biggest problem with homework is _____

My favorite kind of homework is _____

What I like best about homework is _____

To me, homework _____

I'd do more homework if _____

I wish my teacher would _____

I often worry about _____

What's hard about homework is _____

Mark a T for True or an F for False.

_____ I think an hour is too long to do homework all at one time.

_____ When I finish homework I feel very proud.

_____ Sometimes I fall behind on my assignments because I don't understand the homework.

_____ It is important to do homework.

Appendix C: Parts of Speech Test

Name _____

Date _____

Parts of Speech Test

Matching:

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. _____ noun | A. a word or phrase that shows strong feeling |
| 2. _____ verb | B. often shows directions, position, or relation in time |
| 3. _____ adjective | C. a, and or the |
| 4. _____ adverb | D. word used in place of a noun |
| 5. _____ article | E. describes a noun or pronoun |
| 6. _____ interjection | F. tells about an action or a state of being |
| 7. _____ preposition | G. a connecting word |
| 8. _____ conjunction | H. describes a verb, adjective, or another adverb |
| 9. _____ pronoun | I. person, place or thing |

Add an example of the following parts of speech to the simple sentence below:

The boy jumped.

Add an adjective...

Add an adverb...

Add a prepositional phrase...

Label each word in the following sentences with the correct part of speech:

1. The ferocious grizzly bear rose menacingly on his enormous hind legs.
2. The sleepy, young puppy snuggles lovingly into his owner's lap.
3. "Wow! He won first place and took the gold Medal at the Olympics."
4. The beautiful star shone brightly across the darkened sky.
5. The warm breeze blew softly through the sunlit room.

Score _____ /35 points = _____%